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SAUL BEN-KISH.

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A nation's first king.—Ground of Israel's demand.—Election of Saul.—His early vigor and piety.—Philistine wars.—Deterioration of character.—Relations with David.—Battle of Gilboa and death of Saul.

A first king is always a prodigy to the after generations of the people among whom his prominence was achieved; and not unjustly, for the man who wrests for the first time from his peers the reverence and submission on which kingship is founded must be in some practical way the superior of his contemporaries. *Magnus* is at the root of *majestas*, really as well as verbally, and we may be sure that the personality lying behind a Theseus or a Romulus was of no ordinary mold. And then, as might be expected, the fascination of such special preëminence stimulates whatever of poetic faculty is in the people over whom it has been won; and so it comes to pass that what the man himself is—"the bright, particular star," as it were—has further affixed to it in story a halo of romance; an appendage which, while not strictly historical, always gives to the less glistening facts around which it accumulates, an added formative influence on at least the unsophisticated mind. Did not Theseus appear and help his Hellenes at Marathon?

But while the histories of most first kings thus take on a legendary cast, the history of the first king of the Hebrews is a striking exception. It stands before us with all the clearness of simple narrative. What is called the "supernatural" is present in the record because it was present in the occurrences. Saul lived in a period when the religious education of our race needed phenomena of this kind. Just as in the geologic world a period of abrupt and cataclysmic change preceded the present tranquillity and regularity, so in the religious world a period of signs and wonders preceded the present comparative uniformity.

He who admits the existence of a megatherium may admit the occurrence of a miracle; both are facts, if preliminary and passing. But the element of the supernatural, though present in the history of Saul, is not there to an extent to withdraw it from the business and bosoms of us who are walking in the morning-red of the twentieth century *anno Domini*. We can follow the ill-fated monarch with genuine human sympathy, even when he is nearest the spirit land. His story is singular, solemn, sublime. Thoughtful students gather round it as Israel camped round Sinai. Out of darkness, thunder-riven, God speaks. Much we can understand, but some things are awful and incomprehensible. In its simplicity mingled with a certain largeness and tragicallness, this narrative is the Æschylean tale of the Hebrews.

The weird is the outcome of disordered times. Like the beast of the Apocalypse it emerges from a troubled sea. And Saul, himself and his history, could only develop during an era transitional and troublous,—an era when Israel, frequently harassed and always threatened from without, found its chief danger from within. Disintegration seemed imminent. The common worship of Jehovah was of too subtile and refined a nature to exercise a unifying influence on its gross and materialistic people. They longed for the centre of loyalty and confidence possessed by other nations—a king. To this change in the plan of the nation's government, arising as it did from unspirituality, Samuel, the venerable prophet-judge, was strenuously opposed. He declared that from the religious side it was ungrateful wickedness, and from the political side unmitigated folly to reject God and endow any one of their fellows with the dangerous prerogatives of a monarch. But in spite of his denunciations, warnings, and entreaties, the people persisted in counting themselves unworthy of their unique position as the kingdom of God. And, alas! for the stout old prophet, his witnessing for the expiring *régime* was largely neutralized by the sordid and unprincipled conduct of his sons, whom he had himself inducted into office as his successors in the judgship. Yet it was only when directly admonished by God to desist that he withdrew his

official opposition, and with a submission to the divine requirement which does highest credit to his piety, stifling all public expression of his antagonism both as saint and statesman to the popular movement, he awaited events.

Nor had he long to wait. Soon by divine premonition he knew that within "a day" the man chosen of heaven to be future king would present himself. And even then a young man of Benjamin is hesitating about pursuing further a fruitless search after some lost asses. But on the recommendation of his servant and on the discovery of sufficient "backsheesh" in an almost exhausted scrip, he consents to submit the matter to the wisdom of a "seer," "a man of God, an honorable man" in a city close by. Following the genially loquacious directions of some maidens who had come out to draw water, anon the inquirers find themselves in the presence of Samuel. How natural and how pleasing the contrasts brought out in this incident. Though the question of a nation's welfare is in the quivering scale, yet asses must be looked after, and water pots filled; and in the tissue of the divine arrangement the large and the small intertwine.

Saul and Samuel face to face! It is a notable meeting. To the prophet the inner voice speaks, "This same shall rule over my people Israel." Just on his way to give his benediction to a public ceremonial, he assures the young man of the recovery of the straying property and takes him along. Among the distinguished guests present at the solemnity he treats him with special consideration. In the privacy of the evening retirement he reveals to him the mind of God more fully. In the early morning he accompanies his guest to the suburbs of the city, and there in perfect solitude bestows the royal chrism. Beneath this lofty unction it was impossible for even the modest Saul to cherish further doubt. His calling and election were sure. At once his whole being began to accommodate itself to the exalted conviction. He feels the stress of *noblesse oblige*. On his way home the truth of Samuel's principal assurance was established by the fulfillment in series of a number of minor predictions given by the prophet as confirmations. When the last and crowning incident of this nature, a company of prophets in the wreathed

"chain" of a dance executed to music met him, Saul's enthusiasm reached its height; "The spirit of Jehovah came upon him," and revealing under the intense excitement a strain of poetry hitherto unexpected, but which afterwards showed itself at certain crises of his life, he flung aside his hike and joined in their dance and improvisations. His acquaintances, who had not previously seen anything of the rhapsode in the stalwart young farmer, exclaimed, "Is Saul also among the prophets?" and hereafter this query became a proverb expressing surprise at the occurrence of the unexpected mingled perhaps with a little incredulity. An uncle of the neophyte, with more insight than the others, suspected that this mental exaltation of his nephew had something to do with his recent visit to Samuel. But, though interrogated, the youth, with that reticence so frequently the gift of men of large body, kept his secret to himself.

Thus was Saul privately prepared for his high destiny. But the people must "know" him who was "over them in the Lord." The office of public installation was twofold. The first occurred at Mizpah and was local. Samuel was of course the chief officiator, and with the "Stone of Help" in view, with its glorious memories, the old man may be pardoned if he prefaced his duties with some lamentation over the people's lapse from the theocratic relation. He then submitted to divine decision the question, who was to be the first king of Israel? The lot by successively narrowing circles finally rested on Saul Ben-Kish. The young man, who, as we have seen, already knew his destiny, dreaded these public formalities, and attempted to avoid them by hiding himself among the baggage which was drawn up around this national camping-ground. He was, however, soon discovered, and by a kindly violence placed before the people. At sight of the blushing giant, even the prophet felt the influence of "goodliness" of body, especially when connected with an absence of ostentation, and in words which even yet convey a genuine admiration, he addressed the people, and said: "Look ye on him whom Jehovah has chosen, there is none like him among all the people." And those who heard this vigorous "Ecce homo," when they saw before them one who so fully

answered their physical ideal of a king made the "Watch Tower" and "The Tooth" and even "The Stone of Help" to reverberate that cry to be afterwards heard so frequently and under such varied circumstances,— "Long live the King." But as approbation, however general, is never absolutely universal, there were some malcontents. The insults offered by these "worthless fellows," though open and deliberate, were, with a restraint not often illustrated by those new to power, ignored by Saul.

The ability of the young monarch was soon tested. An Ammonite invasion had been for some time impending. Indeed preparation for this was an element of urgency in the appointment of a king. In about a month, if we accept the Septuagint version, the storm burst and Nahash threatened Jabesh-gilead with a doom unusually wanton and cruel. Amid the terrified and weeping people Saul acted on Samuel's advice on the morning of the anointing: "Do thou as occasion serves thee, for God is with thee." With the vigorous promptness of a veteran chieftain, the farmer-monarch adopted an expedient not unknown in the history of Benjamin. He hewed in pieces the yoke of oxen he was driving when the ill news arrived. The bleeding members were sent through "the coast of Israel." To the summons of this gruesome symbol there was a general response. So thoroughly were the Ammonites discomfited that "two of them were not left together." But even in this uprising of the Hebrew nation we detect that "little rift" which would "slowly widen" into the future disruption. The census of Judah is taken apart from that of Israel.

The fertility of device and firmness of temper exhibited in this matter of Jabesh-Gilead made Saul the darling of his people. They would, with Oriental fervency, have proved their devotion by putting to death those who had insulted their favorite. But here again Saul's averseness to the shedding of blood showed itself; he firmly refused to have the lustre of such a day of deliverance sullied by useless severity. Samuel, on the watch to strengthen the hands of the young monarch in every legitimate way, utilized this prevalent enthusiasm to secure for his *protégé* a larger recognition as king than had been possible at Mizpah. He hastened

to convene a meeting at historic Gilgal. Here in the first days of the occupation the people had by the resumption of the rite of circumcision "rolled away the reproach of Egypt." Here, then, "the kingdom should be renewed." The new dynasty should be "broad-based upon a people's will." A plebiscite was taken. "There they made Saul king before Jehovah in Gilgal." Upon this fitting theatre closed the period of the judges and opened the period of the kings. Samuel announced his retirement from public life, and in his valedictory words reiterated his regret at the downward step which the people had taken, but, knowing that hopelessness is the enemy of virtuous effort, with a tender consideration went on to add that even on the lower platform of national existence which they had chosen, if both they and the king should continue following Jehovah, it would be well with them. That a conscious Deity still took interest in Israel he demonstrated by invoking successfully "thunder and rain" in the parched months of wheat harvest. He comforted them with an allusion to the covenant by which it had pleased God to make them his people, and with an assurance that though as a judge he no longer moved among them, yet that as a priest he would pray for them, and as a prophet teach them "the good and right way." With these words of compassion and encouragement, Samuel left the governmental stage free to Saul.

The curtain now falls for a time upon the life of Saul. When it rises again, after an interval perhaps of fifteen years, it is no longer the retiring youth in affectionate and dependent alliance with Samuel, who is disclosed. It is a veteran warrior in the practice of his trade, and with whom Samuel is only occasionally present. In his obscurity he has been waging war with the Philistines, but so unsuccessfully that these, from being invaders, threaten to become occupiers of a central portion of his kingdom. The spirit of the nation is completely broken. The army consists of only three thousand men, and is rather a body of personal retainers than a national force. Many of the people have betaken them to the mountain hiding-places. The Philistines have taken care to deprive the farmers of such tools as

might be available in warfare, and not unwisely, since sometimes, in the hands of an indigent but indignant people, the pruning hook has become a spear, and the plowshare a sword. No forge was worked by an Israelite, and if even a goad needed to be sharpened it had to be taken to a Philistian smith. In Saul and his handful of household troops was the attenuated continuity of Israelitish nationality alone preserved. The principal portion of these held the heights of Michmash. Beneath was a deep ravine, and on the opposite side some Philistines were encamped at Geba. Upon the rear and left flank of these were posted a thousand men under Jonathan, who for the first time steps upon the scene a mature and capable guerilla warrior. His position of vantage enabled him by sudden assault to exterminate the neighboring garrison. Saul bruited this daring deed throughout the land, to stimulate the faltering courage of his people. But the affair only awoke the Philistines to more violent aggression. They entered the land "in multitude as the sand which is on the seashore." Saul fell back on Gilgal, as the best gathering place for the nation. The ever-increasing host of the enemy was only ten miles away. His own army was hourly dwindling. The campaign had begun irregularly by his hasty action in making the temporary success of Jonathan a signal for a general rising. It should have been heedfully entered upon with solemn sacrificial rites performed by Samuel as the high priest of the nation. And now at Gilgal the impetuous monarch would rectify his mistake. There, according to appointment, he purposed to wait seven days for the coming of Samuel. But the tension became extreme. His people were deserting him, and the attack of the Philistines was likely soon to be made. In such crises men's characters are revealed to their depths. Saul's inveterate self-confidence was laid bare. His subordination to Samuel in any respect had been always irksome to him. At such a conjuncture as the present it was intolerable. If Samuel had the interests of Israel as deeply at heart as he, why was he not present? But why, indeed, should this preliminary rite of sacrifice be alone entrusted to one who was only lingering superfluous on the public stage? How fertile the fretful spirit in such queries! Perhaps the hard and worldly spirit

of the monarch saw in this deferred sacrificial rite only a histrionic device to affect favorably the fainting spirits of a superstitious people, and if so, why might not he perform it as well as another? But with so little of detail before us we can only imperfectly surmise the character of Saul's soul wanderings. We do, however, know that these seven days of anxious expectancy were crucial days to him. "He that believeth shall not make haste." But he had not that confidence in his mission as God's agent for the deliverance of Israel which would have enabled him to "stand still and see the salvation of God." He cannot hold his irritable impatience in check. Before the completion of the seventh day he began the service of sacrifice, in the continued absence of Samuel. It was to consist of two parts, a burnt offering and a peace offering. Scarcely had the smoke of the burnt offering ceased to stain the sky when Samuel was present. Sternly he denounced this act of impetuous prematurity: "Thou hast done foolishly. Thou hast not kept the commandment of Jehovah. Thy kingdom shall not continue." It would be unworthy of the whole history of Samuel to consider these words as the language of an intolerant priest denouncing an infringement of his functions. As in the sacrifice of Cain, the ritualistic irregularity implied moral depravity in the offerer. Saul's insubordination, impatience, and disobedience were unworthy of his elevated place, and dangerous as an example to his people. He was unfit for the throne. Tested as a king he was found a "castaway." "Now thy kingdom shall not continue," said Samuel.

Nor had this impious and unfortunate action the temporary success which Saul had hoped would accrue from it. When he retired to Gibeah his followers were reduced by desertions to six hundred men. Again, it is Jonathan's personal prowess that stayed the falling fortunes of Israel. The Philistines were encamped close by. In three divisions their raiders were devastating the land. Their principal garrison was perched on a triple summit in Michmash. Against this the crown prince devised his act of daring. Accompanied by his armor-bearer, and under covert of its rocky sides, he clambered to the top, and there wrought so great a slaughter that the defenders evacuated the position in

such haste as to throw the camp beneath, weakened as it was by the large numbers detailed on foraging expeditions, into a general panic. The Israelitish watchmen soon detected the unusual confusion. Saul was at a loss to account for it, and sent for the ephod to make inquiry of Jehovah. But as he heard the noise beneath increase, his warrior spirit irreverently arrested the appeal to heaven. Like "the wild roe of Israel" he sprung with his little band of trained warriors upon the rout, invoking with his usual recklessness a curse upon him who, at such a critical conjuncture in the affairs of his country, arrested his sword to take food. There was a general rising of the people, and only at Aijalon did fatigue and the approach of night compel a halt. The ill effects of Saul's rash imprecation were now apparent. The victors in the pressure of their hunger disregarded the usual ritual regulations in the hasty preparation of their food. To obviate this error Saul appointed a sort of central *abattoir*, and to expiate the guilt erected an altar. But a further and more personally poignant effect was to be experienced by Saul. No celestial phenomenon lengthened the day as when Joshua smote the Amorite in this neighborhood. The question of a night pursuit was therefore debated. When the divine determination was sought there was no reply. The pollution of some crime lay upon the camp. On investigation Jonathan was found to have tasted a little honey. The unintentional misdemeanor at once offered himself as the piacular victim for the people, and Saul in his martial frenzy would no doubt have anticipated the accursed *Imperia Manliana* of Roman history, and immolated his son on the battle-field, had not the army interfered with such unanimous firmness that even the furious despot withdrew from his purpose. Nor was this the only time when Saul sought to slay Jonathan. His bearing towards his favorite son is inexplicable, for while usually tenderly affectionate, it sometimes betrayed a malignant suspicion, founded it would seem on some painful occurrence in his mother's history.

War was Saul's life long occupation. He fought at intervals against Moab, and Ammon, and Edom, and Zobah, but ever with the irrepressible Philistines, His treasure and his time were

spent principally upon his army. Like an Oriental Frederick William, "When he saw any strong man or any valiant man he took him unto him." At length arrived the grand climacteric of his moral life. Samuel as the mouthpiece of Heaven, deputed to him the most solemn duty which can be required at the hands of a man—the extermination of the Amalekites. It was a popular undertaking, and Heaven's executioner found himself at the head of two hundred and ten thousand men,—a gathering which suggests the hordes which went on the early crusades, or followed the Mahdi recently in the Soudan. Notwithstanding this vast equipment Saul did not, as he might have done, root out this brigand tribe. This their inroads soon after upon the Philistine and Hebrew borders, of which the assault on Ziklag was a part, made evident. He harried the country from Havilah to Shur, and destroyed everything along his path. But as Samuel's accusation sets forth, though commissioned to fight against the Amalekites till they were utterly destroyed, he "did not hearken to the voice of Jehovah, but flew upon the spoil." Instead of being the Sword of incorruptible justice falling with the unswerving, passionless steadiness of the lightning flash, with stolid insensibility to the judicial elevation of his mission, he degenerated into a mere "riever," a sort of royal Rob Roy. He converted the sacred war into a raid for spoil, and even brought away the reigning Agag to grace as a captive the pomp, and perhaps, along with holocausts of cattle, to die in the crowning sacrifice of the triumph. Unconscious of the terrible magnitude of his dereliction, and full of pride, he had re-entered his country, and after setting up a monumental pillar on the southern Carmel, was slowly advancing with his train of booty when Samuel met him. In what seemed the very vicegerency of Heaven he had failed, and the doom so long threatened falls: "Jehovah hath rent the kingdom from thee, and given it to a neighbor that is worthier than thou."

Saul's deterioration was now rapid. He became the prey of despair and suspicion. The inward susceptibility which had left him open to those excesses of mental exaltation which were the wonder of his friends, disposed him in his present spiritual isola-

tion to fits of deepest gloom. Music and song were remedies in these times of melancholy. So David came to court, for in Israel no fingers were more skillful than his upon the harp, and no *improvisatore* could pour forth such lyrics. With a king the victim of these insane aberrations, the kingdom could not flourish. The Philistines again invaded the country, and that in braggart fashion. Then occurred David's victory over Goliath, celebrated by that chorus of Hebrew women who in the joy of recent deliverance indiscreetly exaggerated the successes of the shepherd-warrior as compared with those of Saul, and thus unwittingly awakened the monarch's suspicion and hate. By secret and open methods Saul sought the life of David, till finally he drove him from court and the settled habitations of men to fly as "a partridge in the mountains." The fugitive became a Hebrew Robin Hood, true to his king, the enemy of the oppressor, and the shield of the oppressed. Two-thirds of the story of Saul consists in affecting tales of this unrelenting persecution, borne by its victim with a chivalrous loyalty unparalleled. Adullam, Nob, Bethlehem, Engedi, and Hachilah, the place of final tearful parting, are names never to be forgotten.

Samuel died, alas! not before he had heard of the massacre of the priests at Nob. Saul was now alone, and the end of the tragedy rapidly drew on. In his exaggerated fear and unremitting pursuit of David he had left the land comparatively unprotected. The Philistines, therefore, pushed forward into the vale of Esdraelon. They covered the slopes of little Hermon about Shunem. Saul confronted them on Gilboa. But he "was afraid and his heart trembled greatly." The decisive day of the campaign was approaching. He was seized with an irrepressible desire to know what was for him in the future. He sought to allay this craving by legitimate methods. But dream and prophet and "Urim and Thummim, those oracular gems," were all irresponsive. Jehovah in mercy gave no answer. But the headstrong despot would notwithstanding pierce into the *arcana* divinely reserved from his knowledge. In his exceeding exigency he became untrue to the tenor of his past life, and resorted (for men adrift from God have no basis

of consistency) to necromancers whom in the early part of his reign he had adjudged only worthy of death. How significant in this development the words of Samuel, "Rebellion" against God "is as the sin of witchcraft"! Beyond the enemy's lines, at Endor, lived a woman reputed to be a vehicle (*ob*, bottle) which was "filled" with "a familiar spirit." To her on the evening before the battle he resorts in disguise. Never as in this story has the *Nekyomanteia* (illicit converse with the dead) been so set forth. How much of the ghastly phenomena was subjective to the night distraught monarch it is impossible to say. But, whatever was its nature, that uncanny night left him a nerveless, hopeless man. Next day the scythe of war passed over "the high places of Gilboa," and the "bubbling fountain" which gave the hill its name was distained with Hebrew blood. The accounts of the last moments of a warrior slain in the *mêlée* of a disastrous field are seldom clear. Perhaps the order of incidents attending Saul's death is the following. Sore wounded by the Philistine archers, he solicited death at the hands of his armor-bearer, but was refused such awful service at the hands of a subject. He then attempted suicide by falling on his sword, but in his wounded state only imperfectly accomplished his purpose. While reclining supported by his spear, in his pain he entreated a young man who happened to be by, "Stand, I pray thee, upon me, and slay me." And the young man, not influenced so much by compassion, as by the prospect of certain possible advantages to be received from David when he could assuredly announce to him the persecutor's death, placed his foot on the body of the fallen king and gave him the *coup de grâce*. Stern is the Nemesis which follows disobedience to the divine will. The man beneath whose heel Saul poured out his life's blood was "the son of a stranger, an AMALEKITE."